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ABSTRACT

By employing techniques learned through special education research together with the process approach to teaching writing, the composition teacher can help the ever-increasing number of learning disabled (LD) students in the developmental writing class to improve their writing. Using the process approach, LD students first concentrate on gathering information and ideas, then select appropriate information for purpose and audience, and organize that information before they edit. Some LD specialists and composition teachers favor evaluating LD students' writing using an analytic scale instead of a holistic approach. A useful technique appropriate for the heterogeneous class is collaborative learning. Composing on the computer is an option for students with poor handwriting although studies of its effectiveness have been mixed. At the heart of a successful writing program for the mainstreamed LD student is a peer tutorial program. If these suggestions are followed, LD students as well as others in the composition class should be able to improve their writing. (Sixteen references are attached.) (RS)

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The Learning Disabled Student in the College Writing Class

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Learning disabled students are attending college in ever-increasing numbers. However, few campuses have organized programs to accommodate these students, so often after acceptance they are left to survive on their own with minimal help, especially in traditional four-year colleges. Hence, LD students often attend regular classes, never seeing a learning disabilities specialist, and the responsibility for their learning falls to the individual course instructor and to whatever support system may exist. Because writing deficits plague most LD students, the developmental writing instructor is usually the one faced with helping these students to improve their writing and ultimately to get through school. This task is formidable, for the LD students' writing often appears bizarre. They are able to get only a few words on the page, spelling is sometimes beyond comprehension, and organization and a sense of logic are often missing. In addition, little has been written in the major composition journals on teaching strategies for the learning disabled in college writing classes, perhaps implying that LD writers differ little from basic writers, a notion hotly disputed by LD specialists. For example, only one article on the subject has appeared in *College English*, O'Hearn's "Recognizing the Learning Disabled College Writer" (1989), and *College Composition and*

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Communication remains mute on the subject. Recently, however, with the influx of LD students into both two and four year colleges, a little more information is becoming available, mainly from the Special Education field. Researchers such as Alley and Deshler, Collins, Gregg, and Vogel offer insight into and suggestions for teaching these students. By employing these techniques learned through Special Education research together with current methods in teaching writing, the composition teacher can help LD students in the developmental class improve their writing.

The expansion of research into composing beginning in the early 1970s has led to the conclusion that composition instruction is most effective when it takes a process approach. Students should first concentrate on inventing (gathering information and ideas), selecting appropriate information for purpose and audience, and organizating that information before they edit. Vogel (1988) reports that this task division helps LD learners to cope with the multiple demands inherent in the writing process. Students in a developmental writing class could spend the first half of the semester creating, drafting, organizing, revising and selecting appropriate vocabulary without discussion of editing concerns. Papers written during this time would be graded on content only. In the second half of the semester, students would concentrate on sentence structure and improving syntactical maturity, as well as eliminating errors, and

punctuation. Gregg (1982) suggests that sentence combining exercises increase fluency for LD students, "forcing the students to utilize their own intrinsic knowledge of language." While correction of surface errors in no way should dominate the instruction, it must be addressed since students are expected to follow the conventions of Standard Written English when they write in other classes, and LD students are weak in monitoring errors in their own writing (Alley & Deshler, 1979). The papers written earlier could then be edited and resubmitted for a new grade. Since students learn by writing and their own work is the most useful for diagnostic teaching, they should write or revise a minimum of one paper a week, with some of the work being completed in class to help with essay exam strategies. This step-by-step approach suits all students and enables them to master a segment of the writing process before moving on to the next and provides a sense of achievement while removing the emphasis from superficial concerns (commas).

The question of evaluation arises when the LD writers' work is being considered along with that of basic writers. Although many composition theorists favor holistic scoring, this method alone proves insufficient for LD learners because their strengths are likely to be hidden among an overwhelming number of errors. For this reason some LD specialists and composition teachers favor an analytic scale which provides

a breakdown of the writer's strengths and weaknesses, and works well for a mixed population (Moran, 1987, Vogel, 1988). One such scale is a modified Diederich Analytic scale which divides a 24 point score into six categories: Ideas, Organization, Vocabulary, Sentence Structure, Spelling, and Punctuation & Capitalization with each category receiving a possible four points. At first, instructors grade only on the content areas, then add a category at a time as students learn the concepts. This breakdown shows the student what areas of the writing need improvement and which areas he has mastered. Also, the student could pass the course despite poor performance in any one category, e.g. spelling.

A useful technique appropriate for the heterogeneous class is collaborative learning. As Ken Bruffee points out (1985), writing should be a collaborative act, yet often it is taught as a solitary activity. Collaboration in the composition class can benefit LD students along with the others. Group brainstorming enables students to generate ideas at the same time as they improve interpersonal skills. For some LD students who are adept at spoken language, this method proves especially fruitful. Many instructors like to use freewriting as a creating technique, but sometimes that can be tension producing and self defeating for the student who cannot think on paper. Also, students find Elbow's questioning productive and fun (Elbow, 1981). Besides group creating, students can comment on one

another's drafts, offering suggestions for revision (Elbow & Belanoff, 1989). This technique is effective for the LD writer because it provides her with more feedback than the teacher can give (Newkirk, 1984). If the instructor is careful to group each LD student with two or three understanding, cooperative, more successful students, they can model behavior and strategies that have worked for them along with giving helpful feedback. Students can aid one another in the editing stage also by exchanging papers and discussing sentence structure, spelling and punctuation (Karegianes, Pascarella, & Pflaum, 1980). Often the discussion is lively with students much more involved than if they were doing grammar drills and exercises. However, if exercises must be employed to reinforce a particular concept such as subject-verb agreement, they can be structured as a group activity using cooperative learning as suggested by Maheady, Sacca, & Harper, (1987).

Although the preceding approaches can help the LD student, classroom modifications are also necessary. Above all, additional time must be allowed for in-class writing or quizzes. The LD student with his processing difficulties cannot cope with tight time constraints. Also, instructions should be given both orally and visually, carefully organized into an easy to follow format with vocal emphasis and repetition to stress important points. If necessary, the instructor could provide the student with a copy of the class notes in advance. For students with reading problems,

textbooks on tape can be obtained from The National Library Service for the Blind and Visually Handicapped; however, since this takes some time, instructors would need to make their text choices available to the student before the semester begins. Taping classroom lectures should be permitted of those who would benefit.

Some LD students, especially those with poor handwriting, labor for hours, often producing little. Composing on the computer is an option for these students although studies of its effectiveness have been mixed (Bridwell-Bowles, L. (1987). A study by Collins, Engen-Wedin, Margolis and Price at the University of Minnesota (1987) indicates that LD students can achieve at a level with that of non-LD peers in mainstream writing courses (process approach) taught by regular faculty using a workshop format and word processors. Also, the computer provides an ease of revising and editing that results in a better product although at this time only testimonial evidence supports it. This option is only advantageous for the student who has had some experience with the computer; if not, then a training system would have to be designed to acquaint the student with the machine and word-processing software. But with computer literate students, computer drafting frees them somewhat from fine motor and eye-hand coordination, provides an easy-to-see format and such aids as a spell checker. In addition, computer use seems to make the writing process more comfortable and less threatening.

At the heart of a successful writing program for mainstreamed LD students is a peer tutorial program. The ideal tutor is enrolled in a teacher training program, preferably Special Education (Mangrum and Strichart, 1984). Colleges with Special Education departments have an excellent source to draw from. However, without such resources, colleges could recruit students with a solid grounding in the basics who are competent writers themselves, not simply English majors with a literature background. Some colleges hire adult tutors to work with LD students although usually peers have a closer rapport with each other and can model techniques for academic success as well. The key to effective peer tutoring is thorough tutor training and close cooperation between instructor and tutor. Tutors need to learn what to expect from LD students and what strategies to use. The tutor can help the student with generating ideas and developing them, perhaps introducing Kerrigan's Six step process (1975), shaping the essay into a unified whole (using mapping or other learning strategies), and straightening out the tangled syntax frequently found in the work of LD writers. Sentence combining (O'Hare, 1973), using kernel sentences, generated by the student improves syntax and grammar and can be adapted to the tutorial session. For editing, the tutor should focus on remediating one particular problem at a time, e.g. fragments or comma splices, looking at examples in student's papers. Care should be

taken to continue with one category until the student understands the concept thoroughly. Jumping around, looking at all errors on the page, can lead to confusion and no retention. The peer tutor can assist the instructor in doing an error analysis of the student's misspelling and showing students how words can be visually isolated by windowing or spreading out and triple spacing. Above all, the tutor must be cautioned not do the work for the student, no matter how much she wants to help. Learning takes place when students are actively involved (Alley & Deshler, 1979). Also, for this reason sessions should be limited to approximately 50 minutes to accommodate the attention span of the student.

If these suggestions are followed, LD students as well as others in the composition class should be able to improve their writing. Because problems of the LD learner vary so greatly, no one prescription will work, and new methods must be explored constantly. Often it is helpful to talk to the high school resource room teacher and/or write for a copy of the IEP. With this added information, the writing instructor can provide individualized instruction aimed at the student's weak areas through peer tutoring or student-teacher conferences. As research in this field continues, writing instructors should find their jobs becoming a bit easier although helping the learning disabled student to gain some success in his writing will always be a challenge.

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